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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 000795

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: FIRST DAY OF MAOIST STRIKE QUIET

REF: KATHMANDU 788 AND PREVIOUS

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Summary: The streets of Kathmandu were comparatively quiet during the first day of the five-day general strike called by Maoist insurgents April 23-27. Most city shops remained closed, and public transportation was sparse. Most vehicles on the road bore either diplomatic plates or Government of Nepal plates--with the occupants of the latter vehicles generally security personnel. A core EAC convened the late afternoon of April 23 to review the situation to date and plans for the following day. As it did today, the Embassy plans to operate as usual April 24. End summary.

DAY ONE: RAINY AND SUBDUED

2. (U) Kathmandu city streets were comparatively quiet the first day of the five-day general strike, or "bandh," called by the Maoists April 23-27. About 90 percent of the shops in town remained closed, and public transportation (apart from a few intrepid taxis with paper taped over their license plates to avoid identification) was sparse. Most vehicles on the road bore diplomatic license plates or the Government of Nepal plates given to official vehicles--and many of the latter were carrying police or army troops, rather than civil servants. Pedestrian traffic was somewhat light--due in part perhaps to persistent rain throughout the day.

3. (U) As of COB April 23, the Embassy had received comparatively few reports of security incidents in the capital and its environs. The previous night suspected insurgents threw a socket bomb at the home of a Royal Nepal Army colonel; security forces successfully defused the bomb and no injuries were reported. In a similar incident the same night, suspected Maoists threw another socket bomb at a police post in the Pulchowk area of the city. Early the morning of April 23, a petrol bomb was thrown at a mini bus in Lalitpur in the Kathmandu metropolitan area. The bomb exploded in front of a police station, injuring one policeman on duty. Outside of Kathmandu, in Rautahat District the night of April 22, suspected insurgents set fire to two different buses. No injuries were reported.

4. (SBU) A quick survey of Chief District Officers (CDOs) in several outlying districts revealed varying degrees of observance of the bandh across the country. In Jhapa in the eastern part of the country, the CDO reported that no vehicles were in operation, and only a few shops open. In Kavre, six buses were operating--but only after being given a police escort. The CDO said only a few shops were open in his district capital as well. Three buses reached Tanahu District from outlying districts, according to CDO Khumraj Panjuli, but no other vehicles were moving. Nearly all the shops in Tanahu's two largest towns were open, he said. In Bardia few vehicles were running, but most shops were open in the district headquarters. Similarly, in the district headquarters of Baglung, most shops were open but few vehicles running. The CDO of Nuwakot, Mathabar Kumar Adhikari, reported that his office had successfully organized a peace rally in the morning. Most vehicles were running, he asserted, and shops open. None of the CDOs contacted reported any violent incidents during the day.

EMBASSY ACTIONS

5. (SBU) The Embassy remained open with normal working hours throughout the day, although FSN shuttles were directed to run a few hours later than usual. The majority of FSNs, however, elected to walk to work, rather than ride the shuttle. The international school and the British school were closed; we understand the international school has decided to remain closed April 24 as well. A core EAC met at COB April 23 to review the security situation and assess

probable conditions for the following day. It was decided that the Embassy will observe normal working hours April 24, and that FSN shuttles will begin operation two hours later than usual.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) Given the events of the past several weeks, the first day of this widely publicized bandh was comparatively quieter, with far fewer reports of security incidents, than preceding non-bandh days. The dismal, rainy weather may have played some role in this. That said, the general population in Kathmandu largely observed the strike, despite calls by the government, the security forces, and political parties to ignore it. Although fear, rather than support for Maoist ideology, is obviously the greatest factor influencing individual decisions to observe the bandh, the Maoists will nonetheless claim victory, at least for this first day. Whether the comparative quiet of the first day will embolden people to flout the strike the second or following days remains to be seen. The Embassy will continue to monitor its security posture.

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